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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: MENNONITE TORTURE CLAIMS DO NOT APPEAR CREDIBLE

REF: A) HCMC 106; B) HCMC 189; C) HCMC 493

1. (SBU) Summary: Following her amnesty in late April, we met on May 10 with Mennonite activist Le Thi Hong Lien and her father (both strictly protect) to investigate claims that torture in prison led to her mental collapse. Our lengthy interviews of Lien and her father and follow-up discussions with the doctors who treated her lead us to question seriously these claims. There are many inconsistencies in Lien's and her father's depiction of her treatment in prison. There also are troubling indications that Lien's father, perhaps on the instructions of the local Mennonite church, was "doctor shopping" to find someone who would confirm allegations of abuse; none have thus far. Our follow up appears to confirm our original judgment (ref A) that this is not a case of organized, willful abuse, but a very tragic situation involving an emotionally fragile and vulnerable young person. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On May 10 we met with Le Quang Du father of "Mennonite 6" prisoner Le Thi Hong Lien, and later with Ms. Lien herself at their very modest home in HCMC's District 2 (both strictly protect). We went to check on her status following her late April amnesty and release from the criminal ward of the Bien Hoa mental hospital. Per ref B, Lien was transferred in mid-February from HCMC's Chi Hoa prison to the hospital following an extended stay in the prison infirmary. Press releases circulated on the internet by California-based "Compass Direct" and other websites report that: "the current physical and mental health of Le has completely broken down due to the severe torture and abuse in the prison. Le was reported to have difficulty using her jaw, which was broken by beatings and left untreated." According to the Internet reports, Lien's parents said that she had "lost her mind" because of abuse. One web site claimed that Lien "has survived after enduring terrible torture in the prison such as drug injections, frequent and severe beatings, electric shock, food deprivation and verbal abuse."

3. (SBU) Du told us that Lien's personality and health had changed after her 10 months imprisonment. Before her arrest, she had been an outgoing 19-year old Sunday school and summer camp teacher for small children; now she is withdrawn and sullen. Du claimed that Lien was in this state because of physical abuse in prison that culminated in a "nerve problem" that left her jaw "out of alignment." As a result Lien was in constant pain and unable to eat properly. Du said that he first noticed Lien's jaw problem when he visited her in the Chi Hoa prison infirmary in early December 2004, about three weeks after her trial. Du was evasive as to whether or not Lien suffered any weight loss while in prison. When we asked him why he did not mention Lien's jaw issue in our initial meeting on January 26 (ref A), Du replied, "you didn't ask." (Note: we did ask -- repeatedly -- about any abuses or problems that Lien might have had. During our January meeting, Du also said that his daughter did not have any problems eating. End Note.)

4. (SBU) Du told us that after Lien's release, he took her to three different private doctors for seven medical exams. CT scans, X-rays, urine, blood and thyroid tests were performed in addition to physicals. The local Mennonite Church of imprisoned Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang paid for the tests. Du also showed us a bagful of medicine that he said the doctors had prescribed for Lien, including two muscle relaxants (Diantalvic and Tolperisone) and Xanax, an anti anxiety drug. Du told us that he did not understand the results of the exams and would not discuss the medical reports further. Neither Chi Hoa prison, nor the mental hospital in Dong Nai province where she was sent in February provided the family with medical records. We told Du that we wished to contact the doctors to discuss Lien's condition. Du said he would support our follow up.

5. (SBU) Du said that Lien continues to attend services at Pastor Quang's house church. Lien has been among those 15 to 20 parishioners whom local police have detained for three to four hours over the past few Sundays. District police stop the service and charge the group with holding an illegal gathering. Despite her experience in prison, Lien does not show any fear or hysteria while in police custody, according to her father. (Comment: this is the only case of police intervention to block house church services in HCMC in the past few months. It appears to stem from the bitter relationship between the Mennonite church and local district authorities. We have registered our concern over continued harassment of the Mennonite church both with the HCMC External Relations Office and the HCMC Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA). The CRA said it would try and work with local authorities to find a way to ease tensions in coming weeks. End

Comment.)

16. (SBU) After meeting with Du for an hour, we were introduced to Lien. She was lethargic and had some difficulty talking. Her father was with her at all times and, on occasion, appeared to try to prompt her answers. Lien said that she was not beaten before her trial, although she suffered from periodic "psychological" abuse and was denied food and clothes that her parents brought her. She could not remember her trial. She told Polloffs that she was not sexually abused either in prison or in the mental hospital. However, she privately told Pol/Econ FSN specialist that she believed that there was one incident when male prison guards leered at her when she was naked and restrained on her bed in the prison infirmary.

17. (SBU) Lien recounted one episode -- she was not clear as to whether this was in her cell or in the prison infirmary -- when she lost consciousness. After that incident, she was always handcuffed by one hand to her bed. Lien said that she was only released once a day -- at 7 in the morning. As a result, she had to urinate and defecate in her bed.

18. (SBU) Lien claimed that during her two months in the prison infirmary she was physically abused regularly. Between three and 10 men would come into the infirmary and beat her "all over her body" on an almost daily basis with police batons or broomsticks. No one would treat her for the injuries she sustained and there was blood "everywhere." She experienced no abuse in the mental hospital. (Note: per ref A, in our interview with Du on January 26, he told us that he saw no evidence of physical abuse. Prison guards and another inmate in the infirmary said that Lien had become violent and "lost her mind." We understand that restraining patients who might even pose a slight threat to hospital staff is common practice in Vietnam. End Note.)

19. (SBU) We asked Lien what the reaction of the doctors in the mental hospital was to her injuries and bruises when she was admitted. She then retracted her claim that the beatings had opened wounds. She added that hospital staff saw no bruising because all her injuries had "healed quickly." Lien said that she could not pinpoint when her jaw was injured, but it had been hurting for "a long time."

Follow up with Lien's Doctors

110. (SBU) On May 11 and 12 we spoke with a general practitioner at Columbia Asia hospital (protect), one of HCMC's leading and most reputable private clinics. Before speaking to us, the doctor sought to obtain permission from Lien's father to discuss the case with us. Much to our surprise, the doctor told us that Du had denied permission. We recontacted Lien's father, who initially told us "he wanted to get the results himself," but then agreed to allow the doctor to work with us. The doctor told us that she conducted a complete physical work up of Lien, including a blood chemistry, and CT scan. Lien's brain function, thyroid and other hormone levels appeared normal, although Lien's speech and comprehension were slower than the general norm.

111. (SBU) We told the doctor that when we visited Lien, we met Lien's younger brother who had severe mental and physical problems from birth. The doctor was surprised, particularly because she had asked Du if Lien had a preexisting condition or if there was any other family medical or mental history that would be helpful in understanding Lien's case. Du said there wasn't.

112. (SBU) The doctor told us that Lien's father specifically told her that he was looking for evidence that beating or abuse in prison led to her jaw problems. The doctor concluded that with the exception of Lien's inability to open her jaw wide, the results of the exams showed nothing abnormal, nor was there any evidence of physical abuse. Of the drugs that Lien is taking, she had prescribed Xanax and medicine for Lien's skin problems. The doctor opined that the combination of the Xanax and the two other muscle relaxant medicines that Lien is taking could contribute to or cause Lien's lethargy. The doctor recommended to Du that Lien consult a psychiatrist for further evaluation. When we asked Lien's father about a psychiatric follow up, he told us that it was up to the church to decide what additional medical or psychological follow up Lien would receive.

113. (SBU) On May 12 we spoke with a facial specialist who evaluated Lien's jaw. The doctor told us that Lien's father also sought confirmation that the problem was caused by impact from a "hard object." The doctor told us that the jaw joint suffered from excessive mobility, but could not confirm the cause. An x-ray of the jaw indicated that the jaw was not broken. The doctor said that the problem could be stress induced, although he could not rule out that it was caused by abuse. Du did not tell the specialist that he had another child with serious birth defects.

114. (SBU) On May 13, we spoke with Lien's attending physician in the Bien Hoa mental hospital (strictly protect). The doctor said that Lien suffered from "adjustment disorder" to the stress of a prison environment. She was given Xanax to ease stress but received no other treatment in the mental hospital. The doctor

saw no evidence of physical abuse. He thought that Lien's jaw problem could be congenital.

Comment

15. (SBU) Based on our interview with Lien and discussions with three doctors we can say with some confidence that she suffered a mental collapse in prison. We likely will never learn exactly why. The shock of prison alone may have been enough; Lien may have been unusually susceptible.

16. (SBU) Available information does not support claims of sustained physical abuse or denial of appropriate medical treatment. There are significant inconsistencies in Lien's and her father's depiction of events, particularly how and when Lien was allegedly beaten. We also are troubled by indications that Lien's father appeared to be shopping around HCMC for a doctor who would be prepared to confirm his assertion that she was physically abused. We will continue to press the GVN to defuse tensions with the Mennonite Church of Pastor Quang. However, once again it seems that Pastor Quang's followers have distorted the truth in order to draw foreign attention.

WINNICK